



# ‘The God of Small Things’: A Narrative of Catastrophic Misogynistic Approach

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**Abstract**— Arundhati Roy is one of the most noted Indian novelist, essayist and activist who mainly stresses on issues related to social justice and economic inequalities. She is the writer who has created ripples round the globe by her gripping write-ups. She has been rightly awarded and bestowed with honour for her daring effort. She stands as the most controversial author amongst the clutch of contemporary Indo-Anglian writers. My simple reason for choosing her work is that I vehemently feel the contemporary critics have failed in bringing forth her true identity as a sensitive writer. She is not a traitor but a ‘world denizen with humane concern’. Her novel ‘The God of Small Things’ has harboured huge worldwide literary attention for its unique writing style and sensational story line. It is acknowledged as a complex and diverse piece of writing that incorporates varied themes such as marriage, divorce, abuse, death, alienation, gender issue, class division and political and religious conflict. The present paper deals with the kaleidoscopic inter play of relationships in the male chauvinistic society, highlighting the dominant role of elderly women whose guidance and stringent norms ruin the life of the younger female generation. The story takes the readers in its stride and enwraps them in its roller coaster ride until breathless.

**Keywords**— Economic inequalities, abuse, alienation, gender issue, conflict.

Arundhati Roy’s ‘The God of Small Things’ is a compelling story of forbidden cross-caste love and what a community does to protect its old ways which sadly leads to absolute abandonment and huge rejection. The author has effectively shouldered the burden of caste and tradition, a double pressure that crushes almost all of her characters and leaves none untouched. It is a tragic story which, at times, reaches such heights that the reader feels dropped into a flux. It is a piercing critique of gender structure, caste structure and communism in India. To be more accurate, the novel is an acute interplay of patriarchy that perennially flows into its veins. Ammu and Velutha’s love story is the soul of the novel, the central theme around which the other themes revolve, creating a profound bond.

‘As she grew older, Ammu learned to live with calculating cruelty’. She, in the journey of her life, marries a wrong man whom she abandons and comes to stay at Ayemenem,

regaining the ‘lost paradise,’ her maternal home. But her stay in this Eden is short as she steps out of the domain to disobey God’s law of abstaining from the forbidden fruit. Her disobedience rains problems for her as well as Adam, Velutha. As a matter of the consequence, she is thrown out of the paradise to perish in isolation. How could she violate God’s Law: “The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how and how much” (33). She is punished for committing a heinous crime in the eyes of the, so called, Indian society which proclaims, “Women are the visible markers of a family’s honour” (Chakraborty Living on 115). Indian society observes a few stringent norms whose violation it doesn’t sanction. Quite obviously the law was broken, Ammu and Velutha had committed the crime and they had to face its repercussion. After the revelation of the horrifying fact, situations became hostile for both, the touchable and the untouchable. Ammu was mercilessly

locked in her room and Velutha was banished at the hands of his own party people, losing all credentials. In rage Ammu blasted and blamed the twins, her children, for the misfortune and called them '*misfortune around her neck*'. The mistake inclusively committed by all proved an albatross round their neck and consequently both met their most unfortunate and untimely death.

Disheartened and discouraged at their mother's conduct, the children dangerously decided to leave along with Sophie Mol (her niece), in the dark, to reach across the river. Unfortunately their boat capsizes and Sophie is drowned. The blame of Sophie Mol's death falls on the easy target Velutha, who is wrongly framed of kidnapping the kids and attempting rape on Ammu. As a consequence, Velutha is ruthlessly beaten up in custody and dies a painful death for '*breaking the laws laid by God of whom to love and how much*'. Ammu loses the paradise. She is kicked out of the house by her brother for murdering his daughter, a crime which she hadn't committed. She is left isolated and abandoned to perish with her twin children Estha and Rahel. Determined to find a job but unable to find one- dejected, disregarded, disowned and dismayed- she dies alone in the most impoverished conditions. Ammu- Velutha's story is a wild and dangerous one through which the novelist gives the readers a deeper insight of misogynistic gender role that strongly ply's in the Indian society. Madhumita Chakraborty in her Critique '*Living on the Edge*' writes, "*There are also different laws that apply for men and women.....that one could accept a lower caste girl into the house as a daughter-in-law but the same did not apply when one had to marry one's daughter to a lower-caste boy, as the family's honour was involved. The implication was clear. Boys still had a certain degree of freedom to choose their partner, but not women*" (115). Ammu was a clear target of this ideology which did not accept her relation with Velutha, an untouchable.

I, through the paper, have tried to sketch a different picture on the canvas. My idea, on the whole, is that the Indian society is so intricately woven that in some way or the other a woman is the sufferer at the hands of, none but, another sect of women who are patriarchal in nature or rather misogynist like men. To bring home this notion I've chosen the famous award winning novel '*The God of Small Things*' written by Arundhati Roy. Novels and stories are, in fact, the mirrors in which we have a true reflection of our society. The background, here, is a small place named Ayemenem based in Kerela where the caste and gender are seen as powerful and instrumental in deciding ones destiny. It is a patriarchal structure with which the society in Roy's novel begins. The main duty of a patriarch is to safeguard the interests of his clan, or family. However, a

deformed patriarchy escalated in the society which castigated the rights of feminine sensibility. The novel commences with the nuptial bond between Pappachi and Mammachi and concludes with the eternal split between Ammu and Velutha.

The novel sets in motion in a sphere where most of the feminine characters are twirled to fit into the reflection of their counterparts. But the resonance seems to dwindle as the patriarchal power gets transferred from one generation to the other. As a result, the novel bridges the space between antagonizing partners to a sympathizing companion. To recount from Roy's narrative, there are different phases of this supremacy which slithers from Mammachi to Rahel. The narrative proves to be an exquisite study of the vigour of patriarchy. It contains various female characters that represent conforming roles available to women in India. In order to illustrate these roles the novel has on its platter Rahel (Ammu's daughter), Mammachi (Ammu's mother/wife), Baby Kochamma (the spinster) and Ammu (the mother/daughter/divorcee/lover). Each woman defines different sexual constraint and chauvinistic traditional structure in a patriarchal society. For example, the youngest female in the novel, Rahel, demonstrates the worthlessness of a daughter to a family in India. Mammachi exemplifies the traditional mother figure and the desired submissive and docile Indian wife. Baby Kochamma represents the woman who attempted to defy the '*laws*' and the barren embittered existence she must live due to her initial subordination. Finally, Ammu, the daughter and mother, who depicts the outlaw and the woman of worth who ultimately, becomes an outcaste because she refuses to submit to the social norms.

Roy verbally paints a picture that allows a person to visualize the intricate web and history of sexism that pollutes the women's hearts and minds. Artistically, the author portrays the patriarchal society that injects the prejudicial and dehumanizing poison which like radiation continues to produce defects for female generations to come. Consequently, the circle of strife continues from mother to daughter, aunt to niece, woman to woman- promoting self-destruction and a sense of inferiority. The desire to retain and retard fellow women appears to stem from an emotional motivation, jealousy, envy, spite, anger and embarrassment. Although, sentiments do prevail at the surface but the underlying root originates from the patriarchal institution that slanders females and uses ancient propaganda to enforce the laws to torture and subdue them.

The youngest victim in the novel, Rahel, learns about the disappointment in her sexual life from female family members' remarks. Ironically, it is the women in her life

who express her inferiority to men. Her weird activities, after the untimely death of her mother, seem to reflect a negative deep impression on her delicate mind, making her quite inquisitive and insecure. Her silly and childish behaviors are an outcome of her loneliness and solemn life. The teachers misinterpret her deportment and instead of correcting her follow the dogmatic norms and ultimately expel her from the school due to her 'boyish' outbursts. In the male dominating, misguiding, misinterpreting and disapproving Indian society it is sad that a girl child is not able to identify her status and coordinates it to the prevailing customs. Rahel is a victim of similar situations. Caught in turmoil, unable to sail against the unfavorable tides, she decides to quit and leaves for America. Thus, she escapes the feudal-patriarchal society and survives by escaping from the stifling confines of the family home into an unconventional life.

This deviation in Rahel is brought by her own family members who compare her status with Sophie Mol and predict Sophie's future to be bright and glaring. Unknowingly, this remark bears a great blow on the sensitive mind of the child which ultimately leads to frustration and insecurity. Her expulsion from school and her emigration to a foreign land are the repercussions of the social web. She gives what she receives. She is an intelligent and honest person who has never felt socially comfortable. She is something of a drifter and several times refers to her existence as 'emptiness'. She is traumatized and haunted by Sophie Mol's drowning, Velutha's murder and Ammu's death. Although these events do not seem to deprive her of her quirkiness and brightness, they assuredly contribute to her sense of sadness and lack of direction in later life. "Over the years, as the memory of Sophie Mol slowly faded, the loss of Sophie Mol grew robust and alive. It was always there like a fruit in season. Every season... it ushered Rahel through childhood into womanhood" (16). In this way a precious life transforms into a worthless one.

Next picture in the frame is Mammachi (Soshamma Ipe), an elegant woman in her old age, grandmother of Estha and Rahel. Pappachi, her husband, who belongs to a male oriented orb firmly believed the role of wife to be subservient and docile. The degradation and humiliation he had heaped upon Mammachi turned out to be a steady habit in her life without which she could not stay alive. Thus, she hung about under the penumbral shadow of her dictating husband. She obeyed the laws and was married according to the caste and custom to a well-off and 'good' man. Although Mammachi obediently heeds to her husband, blissfulness doesn't become her companion. She serves as a slave to the man who beats her daily. In the course of life, in order to keep herself engaged, she began

the pickle factory *Paradise Pickles and Preserves* and ran it successfully and also took training and proved an 'exceptionally talented' violinist. She nevertheless cries at his funeral and also shares many of his values including an extremely rigid view of the caste system. She is blinded with chauvinism but naturally adores her son Chacko and chastises her daughter Ammu. Her love for her son is so blind that she deeply dislikes Margaret Kochamma, her daughter-in-law. Nevertheless, she tolerates and even facilitates Chacko's affairs with factory workers, although to the contrary, she is horrified when she hears of Ammu's affair with Velutha and attacks both Velutha and his father and locks Ammu in her room.

Rahel's grandmother is undoubtedly an example of a traditional wife and mother who breathes new life into the cycle of womanhood destruction. A perfect example of Mammachi's perpetuating the cycle of not only self hate for her womanhood but also projecting hate on other women is Chacko's sexual escapades with low caste women. She understands her son's 'needs' and pays the women who satisfy 'him'. On one hand she pays these women calling them whores and on the other hand she cannot stand her daughter's infidelity. Susan Stomford Friedman's essay 'Feminism, State Fictions and Violence: Gender, Geopolitics, and Transnationalism' explains this hypocrisy of Mammachi's treatment towards her son and daughter more adequately. She writes, "Here, the brother and sister live out different gender destinies: The son Chacko is sent to England for his education, given the factory to run upon his return and allowed a secret passage in and out of the house for his hidden sex life with lower-caste women; the daughter Ammu is kept at home seeing marriage as her only escape, returning home after disgraceful divorce from her dissolute Hindu husband, walled up in the form of a modern Sati, expelled from the family to die alone after her affair with an untouchable is discovered" (11-19). Sadly, Mammachi implements the rules that govern her own restricted existence. She hinders Ammu and Rahel yet praises Chacko. She despises herself, but refuses to acknowledge that her hateful insecurities dictate her emotion and expression towards her female relatives.

A true example of contempt of women is Baby Kochamma, a judgmental old maid. Aunt Baby Kochamma's history equates to the epitome of the annihilation of feminine pride or womanly worth. Her unfortunate past controls her miserable present. She demonstrates the villain, the fatal weapon of a patriarchal society. Willing to kill the slightest sense of women empowerment; Baby Kochamma shrewdly dehumanizes Rahel and Ammu, secretly envies Mammachi and feels inferior to Margaret Kochamma. Dr. Ambreen Hai,

Assistant Professor of English at Smith College, has written articulately on the matter regarding Baby Kochamma's betrayal to other women. Her interpretation from her article "Teaching Recent South Asian Women Writers: Issues of Gender in Literature and Theory" states: "The most evil figure in 'The God of Small Things' is an older woman, the spinster aunt. Roy is very good at showing the ways in which women of all classes and all generations are positioned by socio-cultural systems. Even this aunt, Baby Kochamma, is very much embittered as a consequence of her own history, and we are shown precisely how she has grown to be the way she is; not that it excuses her horrible actions, but Roy gives you a very complex picture of the dynamics that interplay between cultural constraints and individual choice"(2). More specifically, Baby Kochamma is sick with inferiority complex, which leads to her hatred and jealousy for other women around her. She resented Ammu because she saw her quarrelling with a fate that she herself had graciously accepted- the fate of the wretched "Man-less woman" (45). Being unhappy she begrudges essentially all of the womanly things that Ammu was entitled to and she never attempted to obtain due to her environment. Ultimately Baby Kochamma's hatred seals the fate of her niece by destroying her lover and forcing her into self destruction and death.

Ammu, the main victim, divorces her abusive alcoholic husband whom she had married to escape her dysfunctional family, and returns to Ayemenem with her children in search of peace and solace. To her dismay, she becomes an out-caste, a man-less woman and consequently loses her worth; but she fights her destiny like a child. She creates her own world of survival. She shocks and startles the family with her 'unnatural ways': "She walked out of the world like a witch to a better, happier place. On days like this there was something restless and untamed about her as though she had temporarily set aside the morality of motherhood and divorce hood. Even her walk changed from a safe mother-walk to another wilder sort of walk. She wore flowers in her hair and carried magic secrets in her eyes. She spoke to no one. She spent hours on the river bank with her little plastic transistor shaped like a tangerine. She smoked cigarettes and had midnight swims" (44).

In contrast to Mammachi and Baby Kochamma, the author uses Ammu's character to exemplify the struggle between motherhood and mother caring for herself or intent upon loving and finding love for her. Ammu lives in an impossible situation with immense negativity from family and society. She deserves life but society and custom dictate otherwise. She must choose-either to live miserably or die free. Ammu is a beautiful and sardonic woman who

has been victimized first by her father and then her husband. She grew up in Delhi, but because her father said that college was an unnecessary expense for a girl, she was forced to live with her parents. She met her future husband at a wedding reception, whom she abandoned and returned to her parental house. Ammu's latent "Unsafe Edge", full of desire and "reckless rage", emerges during Sophie Mol's visit and draws her to Velutha. After the horrific climax of the affair she sends Estha to live with his father and leaves Rahel in the Ayemenem house while she looks for a job but loses a succession of them due to her illness. She dies alone in a cheap hotel proving her mother's restrictions the final nail in the coffin. Roy has done an excellent job of portraying this mother as a 'woman'.

Through this unspoken gesture, Roy indicates about a character that many non-liberated mothers know in their hearts but dare not say out of fear of being condemned for being selfish and self-focused. Ammu challenges and defines chauvinistic values quite like her medieval sisters who practiced maternal medicine and were prosecuted. Ammu boldly defines laws that control a woman's right to love when she indulges in an affair with Velutha, the untouchable. The constant bombardment of negativity from the female lobby about how her 'life is over' and 'washed up' provoke the need of acceptance in her, the fulfillment of which, she finds in the 'untouchable' Velutha. Ng Shing Ye writes in his article 'Peripheral Beings and Loss in Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things': "[The God of Small Things] is a novel that carries shades of incipient socialism and feminism, the post colonial condition is reinforced by the added drawback of being an Untouchable or a woman, as Velutha, Ammu and Rahel are: their marginality is so acute that leitmotifs of absence and loss accompany them in the novel." Velutha, Ammu's ill-fated lover provides pure untainted love due to the fact that he does not belong to the biased institution that destroyed Ammu's and other women's lives. The two lovers are fugitives excluded from the sexist and prejudicial world, finding ecstasy in each other's arms. He allows Ammu to express her womanhood, sharing her very feminine, thereby dangerous to chauvinistic males, sexuality.

Roy proves in her novel that the ancient laws of intellectual, physical and spiritual woman bondage still prevail in the society creating hopelessness in the lives of uneducated women, restricting them to certain rigid and unchangeable norms which otherwise hold no significance. Each character depicted in the novel represents a woman's lifetime journey. Rahel, the daughter symbolizes the future, a sojourner in a foreign white land desperately seeking to forget her past, her roots and her instilled inferiority and find a place where she can allow her



womanhood to flourish. Next, in the row are Mammachi and Baby Kochamma who are ready to reincarnate in the future. Lastly, it's Ammu, the ever defiant, proud and beautiful, encompassing the abuse of the past and the promise of the future. However, her place rests most suitably in the present unlike a phoenix that rises from its ashes to reconstruct a world for survival. Her rebellion and struggle doesn't end in vain. Her tragic death displays the detrimental effect of the forces that despise a woman who poses her strength. She automatically touches the soul of every suppressed woman pleading to dissipate sisterly hate and promote a woman's right to be a woman without the looming presence of a patriarchal society.

The power that runs through the narrative indicates the events, emphasizing the necessity for social structure. The social hierarchy which Ammu chooses to ignore proves fatal. Chacko is treated completely the opposite because of his male superiority. Maleness gives him the power to choose his own path even after his divorce. Ammu's affair with Velutha causes consequences not just because of his untouchability but because Baby Kochamma is the arbitrator and is determined to uphold the social hierarchy. Much of the tragedy that arises in the novel has been directed to patriarchy. But when we seize to have a closer look, we find that the entire plot designed against Velutha is truly an offspring in the minds of Baby Kochamma, Mammachi and Kochu Maria - the three female characters of Ayemenem House. Not a single male has been drawn into this plot of ambushing a poor untouchable. Thus, we see that the keys of misfortune are within the hands of the female characters in the novel itself. The female characters indeed turn out to be the most malicious ones in the story. Chacko is totally unaware of the intricacies which follow the main events. Sophie Mol's death, the FIR lodged against Velutha and Estha's betrayal of his close companion are stated words that Chacko tries to comprehend once when he returns from Cochin.

Thus, the role of gender is embodied into the text with severe ferocity taking not only Ammu's voice away but the children's as well. Once this has been done there is no turning back and they are all left guilt struck, isolated and traumatized in their own way. The traumatic social alienation of these three characters is what enables the plot of the story to carry through. Consequently it is erroneous to cast the tragedies of the novel in the course of a male conquered world. The tragedies would not have occurred had the female characters acted in a more soothing manner. Thus, we can perceive that Roy's novel articulates the mending of a deep abrasion which time had brought upon. The diminishing role of male authority over female has been portrayed in the most admirable manner. The female characters in turn are building up more and more

power from one generation to the other. We can see daughters who are more spirited than their mothers and sons who are more serene than their fathers. The characters reveal a sense of transition from powerless to powerful and from powerful to powerless. Roy's novel is actually a forerunner to state the transition of a world from a male oriented globe to a feminine world which is rather filled with more vigour and vitality. Thus, the novel stands out to be a testimony for the dwindling of patriarchy, a wound which is healing right now round our society.

Uma Chakraborty in '*Beyond the Altekarian Paradigm: Towards a New Understanding of Gender relations in Early Indian Societies*' observes: ".....because the purity of women is crucial to maintaining the blood purity of the lineages, and also the position of the family within the larger social hierarchy, women are seen to have a special place in families, women are the repositories of family honour- of their own family as a daughter, and of their husband's family as a wife and mother.....The concept of honour serves as a link between the behaviour of an individual woman and the idealised norms of the community. By constantly evoking the twin notions of honour and dishonour families either condition or shame women into appropriate or inappropriate behaviour" (77).

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